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The Dilemma of Identity: A Study of Hindustani Culture

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Abstract

India holds the identity of being one of the largest multicultural, multi-ethnic nations. The nation has always effectively shown her capacity to accommodate various cultures and ethnicities. Most of the cultures and religions have become an indispensable part of India's cultural identity. The hybrid character of the *ganga jamuni* culture further added a unique aesthetic sense to the plural make up of the country. It was however daunting when this culture fell a prey to the politics of the times. The dilemma of identity that the people belonging to this culture carry gets clearly reflected in various art forms too such as architecture, literature, festivals et al. Even today, the plural identity transcends the politics and has established itself as one of the classic cultures. It would be worthy to note that the plural culture survived the political-social turmoil and markedly placed itself as one of the best multi-ethnic cultures.

Keywords: Hindustani culture, *ganga-jamuni* culture, Indian history, identity, Muslim culture

Indian history holds the record for being one of the most tumultuous and wavering in its character. The direct impact of various cultures and explicit exposure to foreign cultures constructed India as a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country. Her associations and eventual assimilation of plural cultures for eons also project the ever absorbing character

of India. History is witness to the fact that various cultures and ethnicities contributed in one way or the other towards enriching India's plural character. Thus, the socio-cultural-political-economic and most importantly the ethnic character of the Indian society kept evolving and changing.

The Anglo historians divide the history of India *broadly* into three major periods: the Hindu period (300 CE-1100 CE), the Mughal period (13 CE-16 CE) and the British (17 CE-Independent India). Various cultures started arriving in the third and fourth century and assimilated into the ethnic character of India. The Jain, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Greeks, Persians, Muslims and eventually the British molded the facet of the Indian socio-cultural makeup. The impact of Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism left a deep impression on the socio-political-cultural character of India. A major contribution made by these sects was the religious philosophy that molded and modified the socio-religious disposition. Jainism and Buddhism today stand as strong religious cults in India.

The arrival of Persians and Greeks attests as another major factor which affected the Indian life style tremendously. The Persians and Greeks came from across the Bactria, into the Hindukush, through Sindh and eventually settled in Hind – a name which they gave to the Indus (*Sindhu*) – the name of the river which has its origin in Tibet, crosses India and eventually enters today's West Pakistan. The Greeks contributed by adding their own style to the Indian theater as well. Similarities can also be traced in the style of performances in the Indian theatre and Greek plays. In due course, the mass movement of the Muslims after the invasion of Turks caused many of the Muslims and Sufi cults flourishing in the Middle East to run towards the East, and save their lives. This movement also initiated the arrival of Islam in India.

The advent of Islam in the twelfth century A.D. was unknowingly going to enrich the socio-political-ethnic character; a character which India was going to carry for ages to come. Islam today is the second largest religion of India holding around 15% of the population. Islam not only gave India a monotheistic religion but also contributed in major ways towards enriching its plural identity. Chandra substantiates,

> Islam came to India in early medieval period and took its place among the many religions of India without trouble or conflict. It was only during the brief period of the incursions from the North and

> West,…that people were filled with bitterness…But gradually the processes of absorption, adaptation and integration set in, ending in the invaders becoming as much Indian as anyone else (1993: 149)

Islam gave India a unique culture – a culture that was an exquisite amalgamation of Islamic and (largely) Hindu ideas and ideals. History validates how with the passage of time, the people adopted this hybrid culture and it commonly came to be known as the *hindustani* culture. Owing to its hybrid character the culture also commonly came to be known as the '*ganga-jamuni culture*'. Defining such a complex culture, Malika Mohammada says,

> Composite culture is a product of borrowing, sharing and fusing through processes of interaction between two or more streams over time, in the belief that such cultural symbiosis has a propensity for greater vitality, through larger acceptability, than mono-culture, either of the dominant or the dominated ethnic segment (2007: 415-416)

The composite culture enriched the day to day life of the people with Hindu and Muslim customs and traditions, respectively. The families would live together, and share and participate in each other's happiness and sorrow. It was common for a Muslim to eat in a Hindus house and vice versa though few customary taboos remained. Celebrations of the festivals such as Holi, Diwali, Ramzan et al were a ritualistic part of their lives. Celebrating each other's festivals was and still is a commonality. History cites the fact that many Muslim queens would visit their Hindu friends to celebrate the Hindu festival of *holi*. An article in *Indian Express* cites how the descendents of the Nawabs still enjoyed *holi*,

> The royal families residing around the city station area in Lucknow have been organising holi functions to share the joy and mirth associated with the festival, strengthening the bonds of brotherhood nurtured since the times of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah.

A fact from the history, 'Dussehra and Holi were officially celebrated by many Mughal kings in Red Fort at Delhi, Holi and Basant were official festivals in Lucknow... Nawab Bahu Begum, used to come to Lucknow from Fyzabad to celebrate Holi', establishes the fact that the two cultures treated each other with reverence and approval.

Numerous facts from history cite the respect the two religions held for each other. *Times of India* cites how Nawab Shuja-ud-Daula's second wife dreamt of Lord Hanuman and got a temple established in honor of Him. Since then the founder's day is celebrated with much gusto, 'Begum Aalia started the tradition of an annual fair which continues till date. As time passed by, the fair became a symbol of Hindu-Muslim congeniality. The tolerant fabric exists even today. Muslims too contribute wholeheartedly in making arrangements for the Bada Mangal.'

The essence of composite culture is not only seen in the arena of culture but also the architecture. Islamic architecture massively influenced Hindu architecture. There are examples of temples with a spire on top. Qurratulain Hyder cites the example of Raj Mata Chhattar Kunwar who built the famous Hanuman temple in Ali Gunj, Lucknow, with a crescent atop its spire (1998: 131). Meera Khare further substantiates the contribution made by the Muslims in the field of architecture, 'The Mughals, coming to power in 1526 in the subcontinent, further added to the rich architectural heritage and introduced their own innovations in design and ornamentation, in techniques and building types (16).'

Another major contribution of Islam towards enriching the religio-cultural heritage stands out in as much as it influenced the class/caste system that was prevailing in the essentially Hindu society. The Hindu division on the basis of caste markedly created a chasm where the lower classes felt belittled. Islam and the Sufi cult in due course contributed in bridging the social stratification. Saeed observes, 'The lower classes of Hindu society were feeling the pull of Islam which offered them equality of social status (1972: 194).' Malika Mohammada says,

> 'The mystical ideas of Islam and the Sufi way of life were so appealing to the Indian mind that even the Brahmans did not remain unaffected by their influence. The Sufis often had the courage to criticise the unfair dealings of the rulers and were

> ready to persuade them to act fairly and righteously with their subjects (2007: 142).'

The society was in myriad ways affected by the mystic cult. The Hindu culture also got assimilated into this cultural pot. The *hindustani* era beautifully reflects the folktales, folklores and folk songs which echo the blend of both the cultures. Songs on weather, weddings, birth, dirge et al wonderfully reflect a commonality of both the cultures. A wedding song, '…*May the shadow of Ali fall on my Shyam Sunder Banra* (Hyder 1998: 308-309)' truly reflects an era that is an amalgamation of Islam and Hinduism; Ali blessing the *Shyam* (the Krishna, the groom). While exploring the mystical India, Kamaluddin runs into *bhikshu*s, *bairagi*s and *qalandar*s of Bihar (91) and provides a picture of the cultural hub, Bengal,

> Everybody seemed to be a singer in Bengal. Storytellers chanted roop-kathas; ferrymen, snake-charmers and elephant-trappers sang their ballads. They sang of Allah, Mohammed or Radha-Krishna. Vaishnavism was flourishing…Mosques and Tantric temples lay hidden in bamboo groves (Hyder 1998: 99).

A marvelous example of multi-ethnicity and multi-culturalism, Bengal flows with Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism, Islam and the Suhravardy Order. A minor example such as the ode paid to Nizam the Robber, reveals the respect the masses held for their hybrid culture. The ode evokes the name of Prophet, Amina, Medina, Fatima, Brindaban, Lord Krishna, Lady Radhey, Great Pir at Naupara, Sita Ghat and Lord Raghunath, 'This ode was certainly one of the marvels and strange tales of Hindustan… (Hyder 1998: 99-100).' Quarratulain traces the unusual relation the Hindu *yogi* on the ship shares with the *qalandar*s and the Khwaja of Ajmer, 'How was it that it was mostly the Shaivite ascetics who found a certain affinity with the mystics of Islam? Was it because of monotheism? (Hyder 1998: 82, 83).'

Another main component that kept the two cultures together was the religious conviction the masses shared. Despite their belongingness to various cultures, people would visit a *pandit* (Hindu astrologer) or a *Maulvi sahib* (a Muslim priest) in times of trouble. While looking for his son, Khavaja Sahib (*Basti*, 2007) visits a Hindu astrologer and

Nirmala's mother (*River of Fire*, 1998) goes to a *pir* to pray for her daughter's health. The era invariably reflects the trust and veneration the masses held for each other's traditions and culture. The religious disparity seemed to vanish at such times. In his interview, Intizar Husain said, "I still feel that I am an exile who wanders between Karbala and Ayodhya" - (The Hindu, March 18, 2003).

A major transition also took place in the field of language – giving birth to a polyglot language known as Hindvi. The language was an offshoot of words from Persian and Hindi. Explaining the language used by the people of the times, Kamaluddin says, '…Hindvi, the polyglot language…consists of Prakrit, Persian, Turki and Arabic words spoken by common people in the Indo-Gangetic plain. Sufis and Bhaktas also use this language to preach their cult of love…(Hyder 1998: 71).' Studying the birth and evolution of Hindvi and its eventual status as the language of *hindustan*, Khan says,

> Language [is] an important part of a composite culture...It comes into being after centuries of development. When Muslims came to India, they brought with them Arabic and Persian….With the interaction of Muslims and the local people, a new language began to develop. This language came to be known as Hindustani. It was a common language formed by deriving words from both foreign and local languages (1994: 33).

Malika Mohammada substantiates, 'Everywhere we get glimpses of a composite Indian culture (mixing of Hindu-Muslim elements); in the field of arts, literature, architecture, painting, sculpture, music, dance etc. as a result of living together for one thousand years (2007: 416).'

History validates that the living together of Hinduism and Islam led to a composite culture wherein both the societies grew together. Talking about his childhood spent in pre-Partition India, Intizar says, '…there was often tension between the Shias and the Sunnis, but, never between the Hindus and the Muslims (Husain 2002: 213).' Such instances from the Hindustani era reflected in *Basti* (Intizar Husain, 2007) and *River of Fire* (Qurratulain Hyder, 1998) project a clear picture of the times.

Ayesha Jalal explains those times as, 'Pre-colonial modes of social inquiry and representation did not perceive Hinduism and Islam as two irreconcilable faiths. Religion was never a matter of political indifference for either Muslim or Hindu sovereigns (Motyl 2001: 743).' The children too are born and brought up in a composite culture. Noticing the strong intimacy among the Hindu and Muslim children Bi Amma says, '"Why were you born in our house? You should've been born in some Hindu's house!" (Husain 1998: 25).' Writers from the pre-Partition times to the post-Partition clearly reflect the dual ethnicity. Intizar who deeply feels connected to both the Hindu and Islamic culture, in his interview to Alok Bhalla, confides, '"I have no idea what a purely Islamic culture is" (Husain 2002: introduction, x).'

History also cites the fact that the people (Muslims and Hindus) during the pre-Partition times, specifically during the British period, retained their names with surnames derived from their Persian genealogy, 'Many Hindu Bengalis had Persian surnames indicating the designations their forefathers had held during the Mughal regime (Hyder 1998: 113).' Ghoshal observes,

> '…the foreign settlers voluntarily absorbed within an incredibly short space of time not only the outward forms and symbols, but also the inner spirit of our civilisation. This was indicated by their adoption of the Indian language and script as well as names (or surnames), and their zealous adherence to the Indian religions (1965: 259).'

Saadat Hasan Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Ismat Chugtai, Rahi Masoom Raza, Qurratulain Hyder, Intizar Husain, et al cite the dilemma of those people who eventually fell a prey to politics of the pre and post-Partition times. Hasan cites Malcolm Darling, a British civil servant, who quotes the loss of *hindustani* culture during the times of the Partition,

> 'What a hash politics threatens to make of this tract, where Hindu, Muslim and Sikh are as mixed up as the ingredients of a well-made pilau….I noted how often in a village Muslim and Sikh had a common ancestor… In this area, even where Hindu and Muslim belong to different clans, they still interchange civilities at marriage, inviting mullah or

> Brahmin, as the case may be, to share in the feasting' (2003: 248).

Characters like Pichwa (Intizar Husain's *An Epic Unwritten*, 1987), Saddan (Rahi Masoom Raza's *A Village Divided*, 2003) and Kemal (Attiya Hossain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, 1992) explicitly reflect the dilemma of dual ethnicity - one that is Hindu and Islamic at the same time. The era reflects a belongingness that had tried to exist as both but failed owing to the politics of the times. The characters reflect the complexity of existence in the pre and post-Partition times because of the recognition given to them to exist as members of one religion. Dealing with such a crisis, Ismat once said:

> 'I am a Muslim; idol worship is a sin. But Pauranic mythology is a part of my national legacy. Eons of culture and philosophies are saturated in it. Religion and the culture of a nation are two different things. Here, I have an equal share just as I have in its soil, its sunlight, its water (Kumar 2000: 60).'

The Partition thus led to mass exodus of people; an estimate of twelve million people who shifted between Pakistan and India in 1947. The Partition novels clearly reflect the pain of exile – living in a new land, in a new house with memories of the past. Instances have been recorded wherein people were noticed remembering/recalling their lost homes and homeland while many others lost their mental abilities due to the distress at the loss of their home. Gyanendra Pandey says, 'They (the *Muhajir*s) had to struggle to overcome new fears, to gradually rebuild faith and trust and hope and to conceive new…'memories'…(2001: 16).' Anthony D. Smith says:

> Land is indeed vital to ethnic separatists … what they need is a 'usable past' and a 'rooted culture'. Ethnic nationalists are not interested in any land; they only desire the land of their putative ancestors and the sacred places where their heroes and sages walked, fought and taught. It is a historic or ancestral 'homeland' that they desire, one which they believe to be exclusively 'theirs'

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> by virtue of links with events and personages of earlier generations of 'their' people (1998: 63).

The dilemma of this dual ethnicity, the dilemma of belonging to a community that was fed with the notions of harmony thus falls a prey to the politics of the times. Yet, it is vital to note that despite the political turmoil and the set up, there are sects which are still surviving in a harmonious sync and are still culturally connected. The living together of the cultures has not only rendered India various beautiful shades of culture but has also established the fact that the blood, the land and the belongingness to the same soil surpasses the politics of the times.

It can be said that the *hindustani* culture that had existed as an important part of the Indian society had held strong socio-cultural ties. It is because of the existence of such enriching heritage that India comes alive as a multi-cultural nation.

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